

What Do We Do With a King? – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Hi. My name is Georgann, and I'm a Harry Potter fan. Given Kent Dunnington's sermon last week, I thought I should get that confession out of the way early so that it doesn't interfere with the passing of the peace later. I'm not a very good fan right now though because I haven't seen "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I" yet; I had a sermon to write this week. If I were a better Harry Potter fan—addict—fanatic, I would have planned ahead so that I would have had enough time to watch the entire series again in addition to seeing the new movie three or four times since it came out Thursday night. I'm sure that's what the Huston family did.

My second confession is that while I really like the J.K. Rowling books about Harry, they will probably never overtake the number one and number two fantasy fiction series spots in my life. Those are forever reserved for The Lord of the Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia, respectively. The Lord of the Rings is holy as far as I'm concerned. It is probably the only reason I survived the long months of 1989 and 90 when Brad was my "dissertation-writing house husband." Brad and I moved to Wheaton, Illinois in 1989 so that I could join the library faculty at Wheaton College and Brad could focus on writing his dissertation. Besides the people I worked with, we didn't have many friends there, so I frequently escaped into the world of a good book in the evenings while Brad wrote. My favorite world to escape to during that time was Middle-earth. I had never read The Lord of the Rings trilogy, and when I was in that world I never wanted to leave it. I intentionally slowed my reading down more and more the closer I got to the end of the third book. Many of you have been to Middle-earth as well, and you know what I mean. It's a difficult place to leave.

After Samwise Gamgee and Treebeard, Strider or Aragorn is one of my favorite characters, but I'm not really sure why. Like most other Americans, I have an aversion to kings. According to the StrengthsFinder personality test that we all take at the college, my number one strength is consistency or fairness as they used to call it. I don't trust kings, presidents, or most other people with power. I would prefer that we all had equal incomes and equal opportunities, and that all kids' Kingsbury Park District soccer games ended in a tie.

So why do I like Aragorn? I like him because he contradicts our standard definitions of kingliness. When we first meet him as Strider in The Fellowship of the Ring, he doesn't look like a king, he doesn't act like a king, and he doesn't seem to have aspirations of becoming a king. In fact at first notice, the hobbits believe that Strider is working for the powers of darkness, for evil itself—for Sauron. Even after they have travelled with him for a long period of time and had adventures together, Frodo is surprised to discover that Strider is actually Aragorn, the heir to the throne of men who will help restore order to Middle-earth. As the novels progress, we see

that Aragorn loves the people. He helps bring them together, and he is willing to sacrifice and risk his life for them and their common freedom. These are the makings of a good king.

There are a few good kings in Narnia as well, but if you think back through human history, it's much easier to list the bad ones than the good ones.

When we lived in Norway, we discovered that Norwegians had a king they loved—King Olav V. After centuries of belonging to Denmark and Sweden, Norway finally gained its independence in 1905 only to have Germany invade in 1940. As Crown Prince at the time, Olav hid out in the northern woods along with his father the king and other government officials. Olav wanted to stay in Norway to lead the Norwegian resistance movement against the Germans, but the others determined that would be too great a risk for the heir to their throne, and he was forced into exile in England. From there he helped build and lead a fighting force of free Norwegians that eventually aided the allied effort that freed Norway in 1945. Even today Olav still remains a national symbol of resistance to Nazi Germany's occupation of Norway.

Olav was Norway's king from 1957 until he died in 1991. While king, he mingled freely and informally with his people, and they in turn loved him as a father figure and fondly called him a "king for all the people." His motto was "My All for Norway." A popular photograph seen in Norway is one taken in the early 1970's of him carrying his skis aboard a local train on the way from the palace in Oslo to a nearby ski jump. At the time, Norwegians were being exhorted to use public transit to conserve oil, and he wanted to align himself with his people in these efforts. Olav was and is still loved by Norwegians because he contradicted kingliness.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the season in the church calendar called Ordinary Time, the final Sunday in the church year, and the final Sunday in the three year cycle of the lectionary. We're ending Year C with Luke leading us through the gospel story, and next Sunday we will begin Advent in Year A with Matthew. If my calculations are correct, next Sunday will be the sixth time we have begun the three year lectionary cycle in St. Paul's fifteen year history. There is a rhythm in our life together. With Christ the King Sunday each year, we complete our journey together through the life of Jesus Christ that we began in Advent a year earlier.

Our lectionary readings for today help us celebrate Christ as King. They remind us that Christ is a different kind of king. They remind us that Christ is the only true king. In Jeremiah 23 the people of Ancient Israel have had a lot of failed kings since they begged God to give them their first king with Saul. In the chapter that precedes this passage, Jeremiah delivered words of condemnation against the four earlier kings during whose reign he had also prophesied. That condemnation carries over into our passage for today. These opening verses of chapter 23 don't name specific kings as the preceding chapter does, but it seems likely that its references to "shepherds" refer to kings as well. According to these opening verses, the "shepherds" in Ancient Israel "destroyed and scattered" their sheep, the Lord's "flock." They have "driven them away" and "have not attended to them." These are not the characteristics of a good king or a

good shepherd. While in other Old Testament pastoral passages, the Lord is likened to a good “shepherd” who guides and protects his flock, these shepherds have failed their flock. This passage tells us that the Lord will punish them for the evil that they have done toward his sheep.

In direct contrast to these evil shepherds or kings, this Jeremiah passage promises that God will “raise up” good shepherds who will care for the people properly. But in addition to these proper shepherds or kings, the people are promised that God will also “raise up for David a righteous Branch” who will have qualities of a true king: he will “deal wisely,” and he will “execute justice and righteousness.” He will be Christ the King.

In our epistle reading, the people of Colossae are encouraged with a great deal of “royal” language to remember that Christ is a different kind of king. He is a powerful yet reconciling king. The passage describes Him as the supreme head of the created order, as the reason “all things hold together.” He is the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” As “firstborn from the dead,” Christ reconciles all things to God “by making peace through the blood of his cross.” He is the true king.

So we’re being told today that we have a king. What do we do with a king? What does having a king do to us? I already told you that I don’t like kings. It may not be so difficult for you Canadians out there, but if you’re an American, your forefathers fought to rid themselves of an overbearing king, so there’s a good chance most of you don’t want a king either. How do we celebrate Christ as King today and every day if we don’t really know what to do with kings?

Will we reject honorific titles like “King” and “Lord” in favor of less hierarchical language and just call Jesus our best friend? Will we distort the language of kingship and unintentionally taunt Jesus as “King of the Jews?” Or, will we like the criminal who hung on the cross next to the innocent Jesus recognize him as King and Lord? We need to find ways both to recognize and to celebrate Jesus as King, ways that reverse the world’s definition of “king” just as Christ did through his life, death, and resurrection.

Our lectionary cycle reminds us through its repetition that we cannot ignore Jesus as King. The cycle ends today with Christ’s coronation, and next week it will start again by telling us that the King is coming. Let’s explore the unlimited boundaries of his kingdom. Let’s stand and wait on him in his royal court. Praise be to Christ the King.